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PRESS RELEASE

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Seven Defendants Sentenced to Life Prison Terms For Conspiring to Kidnap U.S. Citizen In Trinidad & Tobago in a Crime That Led to the Victim's Death - Victim was Kidnapped in 2005, Held for Ransom -

WASHINGTON - Seven Trinidadian nationals were sentenced today to terms of life in prison with no possibility of release for hostage taking in a 2005 abduction of a U.S. citizen in Trinidad & Tobago that led to the victim's death.

The sentencings, which took place this afternoon in the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia, were announced by U.S. Attorney Ronald C. Machen Jr. and William J. Maddalena, Acting Special Agent in Charge of the FBI's Miami Field Office.

The defendants were convicted in July of 2009 of charges of hostage-taking resulting in death and conspiracy to commit hostage-taking resulting in death. The verdicts followed a 10-week jury trial before the Honorable John D. Bates. The defendants include: Zion Clarke, 33; Ricardo De Four, 38; Kevon Demerieux, 28, also known as Ketchit; Kevin Nixon, 33, also known as Shaka; Wayne Pierre, 42, also known as Ninja; Christopher Sealey, 39, also known as Christopher Bourne, or Boyie, and Anderson Straker, 37, also known as Gypsy's Son.

"These seven kidnappers allowed an American citizen to die in a foreign jungle after abducting him at gunpoint while he was on a vacation. For that crime, they will spend the rest of their lives in an American prison," said U.S. Attorney Machen. "This case demonstrates our steadfast commitment to bringing to justice those who seek to harm American citizens overseas as well as the power of our court system to fulfill that commitment."

"This case highlights the importance of cooperative relationships between law enforcement agencies," said Acting Special Agent in Charge Maddalena. "This teamwork resulted in seven violent criminals behind bars for life."

According to evidence presented at trial, the defendants, fueled by greed, conspired to kidnap and hold the victim, Balram Maharaj, for an enormous ransom; the initial demand was for the equivalent of \$500,000 in U.S. dollars. The victim, 62, of Mount Vernon, New York, was a naturalized American citizen of Trinidadian heritage. He had medical problems and had returned to his native country to visit his elderly mother, various relatives, and his young son.

On the evening of April 6, 2005, the victim was sitting quietly with friends at a bar when two armed gunmen stormed inside, confronted him, and dragged him away.

The kidnappers sped away, taking Maharaj first to a coca tree plantation where he was marched off into the darkness at gunpoint. Within an hour, they moved him to a remote jungle hideout in the Lower Santa Cruz forest area, where they bound, gagged and hooded him and tied him to a post. There, he was held captive for about seven days, during which he was repeatedly interrogated, brutally mistreated and forced to die a slow, agonizing death. They knew that Maharaj suffered from poor health, and, during ransom negotiations, his family warned the captors of the seriousness of his condition. Maharaj warned them, too. Yet they continued to hold him in the remote jungle, far from family, where they forced him to die. The defendants then dismembered and disposed of his body, which was finally found in January of 2006.

By the time of this kidnapping, the government's evidence showed, members of the defendants' group had been involved in numerous successful kidnappings for ransom in Trinidad & Tobago. The FBI, in cooperation with authorities from Trinidad & Tobago, investigated Maharaj's kidnapping and death, and ultimately helped bring the defendants to justice.

Some of those prosecuted were members of the Trinidad & Tobago Defense Forces, including members of its Special Forces. Defendant Wayne Pierre had been identified by Trinidadian law enforcement authorities as one of the most dangerous people in Trinidad & Tobago.

Prior to the 2009 trial, four other defendants pled guilty to conspiracy to commit hostage-taking resulting in death and hostage-taking resulting in death. They included Jason Percival, 37, also known as Soldier; Russel Jerry Joseph, 37, also known as Saucy; Winston Gittens, 45; and Leon Nurse, 46. They are awaiting sentencing.

Since the indictment of the defendants, the number of reported kidnappings for ransom has plummeted in Trinidad & Tobago. In 2005, the year that Maharaj was taken captive, there were 58 reported kidnappings for ransom. In 2006, after these defendants and their fellow conspirators were arrested, that number fell to 17. So far this year, only two kidnappings for ransom have been reported.

In announcing the sentences, U.S. Attorney Machen and Acting Special Agent in Charge Maddalena praised the hard work of those who worked on the case from the FBI's Miami Division Extraterritorial Squad, in particular Special Agents William Clauss, Edgar Cruz, and Kenith Jett, and FBI Forensic Odontologist Scott Hahn. They also praised the Miami-based FBI Evidence Response Team, retired Special Agent Marvin Freeman, former FBI Assistant Legal

Attache based in Port of Spain, Trinidad, Supervisory Special Agent Michael LaPlante, former FBI Assistant Legal Attache based in Port of Spain, FBI Hostage Negotiators Zorka Martinovich, Michelle Morey, Jeffrey Artis, and David Clark, FBI Analyst Christopher Wright, FBI Fingerprint Examiner Dawn Schilens, and FBI Firearm and Toolmark Examiner Erich Smith.

U.S. Attorney Machen and Acting Special Agent in Charge Maddalena also acknowledged the work of the Trinidad & Tobago Police Service Anti-Kidnaping Squad and Homicide Bureau, in particular Inspectors Johnny Abraham and John Ramdeen, Sergeant Wendell Lucas, Constable Phillip Forbes, Detective Sergeants Michael Seales and Eric Park, Constables Marvin Pinder, Kendell Abraham, Larry Lodhar, Montgomery Trotman, Sergeant Christopher Paponette, Corporal Dexter Tang-Kwok, Constables Gwendolyn Mitchell-Gosyne, Nigel Bennett, Kumar Ransuran, Corporal Curtis Howard, Acting Corporal Klevys Simmons, Acting Inspector Cecil Toney, and former Constable Kelvin Seepaul. In addition, they thanked the Trinidad & Tobago Ministry of the Attorney General; the Trinidad & Tobago Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions; the Trinidad & Tobago Office of Chief Medical Examiner; former Trinidad & Tobago Medical Examiner Hughvon des Vignes, M.D.; Avery Hinds, M.D., formerly of the Trinidad & Tobago Department of Health; Gabriel Dieffenthaler of TSTT, and Interpol Trinidad, and particularly its Assistant Superintendent Wendell Williams.

They also thanked the Royal Canadian Mounted Police in Montreal, Canada, the staff of the U.S. Consulate and U.S. Embassy in Port of Spain, Trinidad, and Jeffrey Olson, former Trial Attorney, Department of Justice, Office of International Affairs.

In addition, they noted the assistance of U.S. Attorney's Office Victim-Witness Assistance Unit Specialists Michael Hailey and Dawn Tolson-Hightower. Finally, they praised Paralegal Specialist Jeannette Fennell Litz, and Assistant U.S. Attorney Bruce R. Hegyi, who investigated, indicted, and tried this case, and Assistant U.S. Attorney Emily A. Miller, who tried the case along with Assistant U.S. Attorney Hegyi.